12-1973

Using Illustrations in Preaching

Arnold Kurtz

USING ILLUSTRATIONS IN PREACHING

The function of illustration as set forth by Henry Ward Beecher

ARNOLD KURTZ

THE great British preacher Charles H. Spurgeon once referred to America's Henry Ward Beecher as the Shakespeare of the nineteenth-century pulpit.[1] Doubtless the encomium was in recognition not merely of the rich variety of his gifts, but particularly of a Shakespearean faculty of perceiving all aspects of human life and character, and of presenting these in vivid images to the minds of people. It is generally admitted that no preacher before or since has used the illustration so successfully.

The importance of the illustration in Beecher's rhetorical theory is evident in that he devoted one entire lecture of the *Yale Lectures on Preaching*[2] to this means of persuasion. Lionel Crocker regards this treatment of the illustration as "the best discussion of this instrument of persuasion to be found in the history of rhetoric."[3] Students of public speaking are impressed by the frequency with which well-known textbooks quote Beecher on this matter.[4]

The purpose of this article is to review and evaluate Beecher's theory of the place and function of the illustration, particularly as it is set forth in the Yale lecture.

From the Known to the Unknown

With Beecher, the illustration rested on the principle of reference to experience, or of likening the unknown to the known:

> Experience has taught that not only are persons pleased by being instructed through illustration, but they are more readily instructed thus, because, substantially, the mode in which we learn a new thing is by its being likened to something which we already know. This is the principle underlying all true illustrations.[5]

An illustration, then, should recommend an unfamiliar truth by appeal to a familiar one. "Obscure things" are made plain by "being represented pictorially . . . by things that are not obscure and that we are familiar with."[6]

To explain one new proposition by another equally strange only creates two difficulties instead of one. Therefore Beecher was not prone to quote from books that his hearers had not read, or adduce experiences with which they could not instantly identify themselves.

"When you come to preach," he said, "draw an illustration in the range where your hearers live, whether it be high or low. . . . You must go down to your people. There must be a place where your yarn is joined to their yarn, and it must be joined in one common thread."[7]

This meant that the preacher was not "ashamed to talk to the miller about his mill, or to the plowman about his plow."[8] The speaker who would "touch the people where their level is . . . ought to know about the gardener's thoughts, his ambitions and feelings"; he ought to "know what is done in the barn, in the cellar, in the vineyard, and everywhere"; he ought to "understand a naturalist's enthusiasm when he finds a new flower or a new bug."[9]

Alert to Life's Experiences

Beecher regarded this sensitive alertness to life's experiences as indispensable for the public speaker. One could train himself in such penetrating observations as to be constantly laying up a supply of vivid

Arnold Kurtz is associate professor in the Department of Church and Ministry at Andrews Theological Seminary. A graduate of Walla Walla College, he holds the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Andrews University and Michigan State University, respectively. He spent twenty-five years in pastoral and evangelistic work.

mind pictures that would be available when needed.

You see a bevy of children in the window, and you can form them into a picture in your mind. You may see the nurse, and the way she is dressed. You try to describe it. You look again, and make yourself master of the details. By and by it will come up to you again itself, and you will be able to make an accurate picture of it, having made your observation accurate.[10]

Beecher himself had developed this homiletic mind to the point that he saw sermons and sermon illustrations everywhere. By his association with books, or nature, or men, he was constantly laying up facts and experiences, and by these accumulations his sermons grew in his mind. But he did not usually deliver a sermon until it had come before him as a picture.[11]

To accomplish this was his constant study. For this he entered shop and factory, forest and field. He fished with fishermen, shod horses with blacksmiths, talked roses with gardeners and battles with soldiers. No man labored more sedulously to develop this gift.

I can say for your encouragement, that while illustrations are as natural for me as breathing . . . I educated myself in that respect; and that, too, by study and practice, by hard thought, and by a great many trials, both with the pen, and extemporaneously by myself, when I was walking here and there. . . . You need not, therefore, be discouraged if it does not come to you immediately.[12]

Beecher further emphasizes that the illustration must be apt. By this he means it must be accurate and relevant. A seaman in the audience would have contempt for you if you spoke as though "you thought the taffrail was the rudder," just as you would laugh at the politician who cited as Scripture, "Every tub must stand upon its own bottom."[13] It was his philosophy that "when you are talking about matters that men know about, you must know just as much as they do."[14] Beecher also believed that in order to be effective, illustrations must be prompt. That is, they must be delivered with energy and vigor and move swiftly to the point: "Let them come with a crack, as when a driver would stir up his team . . . make it sharp. Throw it out. Let it come better and better, and the best at the last, and then be done with it."[15]

The Function of the Illustration

At least ten uses of the illustration are discernible in Beecher's theory. We will discuss each one briefly.

1. ***Explanation.*** The illustration may be used to make a statement clear. The word *illustrate* means literally to throw light or luster upon anything. The illustration should never be regarded as an end in itself: it lights up some argument, some truth, some principle of life. "The purpose that we have in view in employing an illustration is to help people to understand more easily the things that we are teaching them."[16] Beecher, at this point, introduces his version of Spencer's economy principle—here, the economy of the auditors' attention:

I know that some men . . . justify the obscurities of their style, saying that it is a good practice for men to be obliged to dig for the ideas which they get. But I submit to you that working on Sunday is not proper for ordinary people in church."[17]

To oblige the parishioner to "dig and delve" for the ideas in the sermon was forcing them to do the work the minister was paid to do. The illustration is one means by which the truth is received without effort.

2. ***Assist Proof.*** Aristotle taught two forms of truth—examples and enthymemes. "All men effect their proofs by demonstration either with examples or with enthymemes; there is no third way."[18]

Inductive reasoning depends upon the use of numerous examples. The truth of the general principle in deductive reasoning is often made clear by the use of examples. Beecher knew that frequently a striking analogy will do more to convince the wavering and to establish the weak in faith than a whole volume of philosophic argument. He said:

I have seen an audience time and again, follow an argument, doubtfully, laboriously, almost suspiciously, and look at one another, as much as to say, "Is he going right?"—until the place is arrived at, where the speaker says, "It is like——" and then they listen eagerly for what it is like; and when some apt illustration is thrown before them, there is a sense of relief, as though they said, "Yes, he is right."[19]

A large audience needs truth put in concrete terms. "Illustrations," he declared, "are absolutely the only means by which a large part of your audience will be able to understand at all the abstruse processes of reasoning."[20] It was his belief that an illustration "is a window in an argument and lets in light."[21]

3. ***Add Ornament.*** Illustrations may embellish a discourse but this must never be their chief end. If an illustration is admired in and of itself, it is worse than useless for it detracts from the idea that is being presented. But if it accomplishes its primary purpose of illustrating a point, and at the same time adds a brilliancy to the address, one should not complain. "An illustration is never to be a mere ornament, although its being ornamental is no objection to it."[22]

Beecher reinforces this point in a characteristically picturesque manner:

If a man's sermon is like a boiled ham, and the illustrations are like cloves stuck in it afterward to make it look better, or like a bit of celery or other garnish laid around the edge for the mere delectation of the eye, it is contemptible. But if you have a real and good use for an illustration, that has a real and direct relation to the end you are seeking, then it may be ornamental, and no fault should be found with it for that.[23]

4. ***Assist Memory.*** Beecher suggested that impressions produced by striking illustrations are easily remembered.

One should remember that a lecture is but just begun when a lecturer has finished its delivery. The audience have laughed and clapped, glowed or wept, admired or yawned, as the case may be . . . now they disperse. . . . Young men in an office, clerks in a store, mechanics in the shop, boys in the academy, all overhaul the lecture, and for a week it becomes a theme of reflection, discussion and active criticism.[24]

An intricate argument may soon be forgotten, but if fastened to an illustration it stands a good chance of being remembered. Like a nail, the illustration fastens the argument to the mind.

Then they (illustrations) are a very great help in carrying away and remembering the things your audience have heard from you, because it is true from childhood up that we remember pictures and parables and fables and stories. Now if in your discourses when taking a comprehensive view of truth, you illustrate each step by an appropriate picture, you will find that the plain people of your congregation will go away remembering every one of your illustrations. . . . Your illustrations will be the salt that will preserve your teachings, and men will remember them.[25]

5. ***Introduce Humor.*** When asked if there was an objection to using an illustration that produced laughter, he replied, "Never turn aside from a laugh

any more than you would a cry."[26]

He objected to the religious speaker deliberately producing a laugh for a laugh's sake as "a piece of sensationalism," but if humor arises naturally and spontaneously it should not be stifled. Beecher depended on humor as an instrument of persuasion. He saw that laughter and tears are closely related. "If I can make them laugh . . . I will make them cry. Did you ever see a woman carrying a pan of milk quite full, and it slops over on one side, that it did not immediately slop over on the other also?"[27]

6. ***Stimulate the Imagination.*** Beecher desired the audience to think along with him. He found that the illustration, because it was concrete, because it used narrative, aroused the imagination of his hearers.

> Illustrations bring into plan the imaginative faculty, which is only another name for ideality. . . . You cannot help your audience in any other way so well as by keeping alive in them the sense of imagination.[28]

7. ***Rest the Audience.*** This use of the illustration seems to be original with Beecher.[29] "It is a great art," he declared, "to know how to preach as long as you want to, or have to, and yet not tire your audience, especially where you have been preaching many years in the same place."[30]

His phraseology suggesting that this can be accomplished by appealing to different "parts of the mind" may not suit us, but his meaning is clear that by varying the factual with illustrations and effective material people "will listen to long sermons and think them short."[31]

8. ***Provide for Various Hearers.*** Beecher's concern for his audience is demonstrated at this point.

> You are bound to see that *everybody gets something every time.* There ought not to be a five-year-old child that shall go home without something that pleases and instructs him. . . . There is no way in which you can prepare a sermon for the delectation of the plain people, and the uncultured, and little children, better than by making it attractive and instructive with illustrations.[32]

Because the illustration is capable of assisting proof, of stimulating thought, of appeals to the imagination, it is invaluable for reaching all levels of society. It was undoubtedly Beecher's skill in using the illustration that prompted Anna de Bremont's remark, "He had the charm of bringing his subject within the scope of the most limited understanding."[33]

9. ***Bridge Difficult Places.*** Illustrations often permit the speaker to say indirectly what he does not care to say directly.

"Illustrations are invisible tactics," Beecher said. "A particular subject may need to be dealt with, but if he should deliberately preach on that topic, everybody would turn around and look at Mr. A., who is the very embodiment of that special vice or fault or excellence."[34]

Important but sensitive topics may be treated in this manner without people consciously realizing the minister's intent. Beecher pointed out that he had treated the subject of slavery in this fashion in a church where at first he would not have dared to tackle it. "Before I had been there a year, I had gone all over the sore spots in slavery, in illustrating the subject of Christian experience and doctrine,"[35] yet never mentioning slavery as such.

10. ***Educate the People to Think for Themselves.*** Beecher observed that people who come up under a minister who illustrates, themselves develop an alertness to analogies and imagery. "They begin to see visions, and to catch likenesses and resemblances." They begin to illustrate too. It leads men "to make analogies and illustrations for themselves, and thus brings them into truth. By this means you bring up your congregation to understand the truth more easily than you would by any other method."[36]

Beecher saw that the heart of the communicative process is to make the audience realize the truth through its own experience. The use of illustrations and comparisons is a way of thinking; the audience begins with its own experience and by contrast and comparison enters new realms of thought.

Henry Ward Beecher occupies the unique position of being America's one preacher-rhetorician worthy to take his place alongside those great English preacher-rhetoricians, Blair, Campbell and Whately.[37]

His influence on American preaching to this day has been considerable. Louis Brastow [38] states that Beecher stood at the crossroads of the break between the early nineteenth century dogmatic, doctrinal, argumentative preaching, and the illustrative, expository preaching of our own day.

The *New York Tribune* observed at the time of his death, "He showed what power could be exercised by extemporaneous preaching when it came from a full heart and a well-equipped mind."[39] □

FOOTNOTES

[1] Henry Ward Beecher, *A Treasury of Illustration,* p. vii (see comments by N. D. Hillis in the introduction of this book).
[2] Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching,* Chapter VII. (Hereinafter referred to as *Lectures.)*
[3] Lionel Crocker, "The Rhetorical Influence of Henry Ward Beecher," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech,* vol. 18 (February, 1932), p. 85.
[4] To mention a few: E. D. Shurter, *The Rhetoric of Oratory* (1907); J. A. Broadus, *The Preparation and Delivery of the Sermon* (revised ed., 1898); and W. N. Brigance, *The Spoken Word* (1927). These substantiate their own remarks on the illustration with liberal quotations from Beecher's lecture.
[5] *Lectures,* pp. 154, 155.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] *Ibid.,* p. 172.
[8] *Ibid.,* p. 171.
[9] *Ibid.,* pp. 171, 172.
[10] *Ibid.,* p. 173.
[11] See Crocker, *Henry Ward Beecher's Art of Preaching,* pp. 27-36 on the creative process in Beecher's Method of Invention.
[12] *Lectures,* p. 175.
[13] *Ibid.,* p. 172.
[14] *Ibid.,* p. 173.
[15] *Ibid.,* p. 174.
[16] *Ibid.,* pp. 155, 156.
[17] *Ibid.,* p. 156.
[18] Aristotle, *The Rhetoric,* 1356b.
[19] *Lectures,* p. 158.
[20] *Ibid.,* pp. 157, 158.
[21] *Ibid.,* p. 158.
[22] *Ibid.,* p. 156.
[23] *Ibid.,* pp. 156, 157.
[24] Beecher, *Eyes and Ears,* p. 103.
[25] Beecher, *Lectures,* p. 159.
[26] *Ibid.,* p. 178.
[27] *Ibid.,* pp. 178, 179.
[28] *Ibid.,* pp. 159, 160.
[29] See Crocker, *op. cit.,* p. 55.
[30] *Lectures,* p. 160.
[31] *Ibid.,* p. 162.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] Anna de Bremont, "Henry Ward Beecher as an Actor," *The Theatre,* XVIII (May 1, 1887), p. 246. Cited in Crocker, *op. cit.,* p. 56.
[34] *Lectures,* p. 162.
[35] *Ibid.,* pp. 166, 167.
[36] *Ibid.,* pp. 159, 160.
[37] See Crocker's evaluation, "The Rhetorical Influence of Henry Ward Beecher," *op. cit.,* p. 87.
[38] Citation in Crocker, "The Rhetorical Influence of Henry Ward Beecher," *op. cit.,* p. 86.
[39] *Ibid.*